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Convicted Spy Flees From Lompoc Prison

Speculation That Foreign Agents Aided Escape by Boyce Is Discounted by FBI

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Christopher Boyce, a convicted spy accused of doing irreparable damage to the security of the United States, broke out of the Federal Correctional Institution at Lompoc Monday night.

His flight touched off speculation that foreign agents may have been waiting outside the prison to help him, but the FBI scoffed at such a notion.

Boyce, 26, disappeared without a trace, leaving behind a pair of tinsnips and a crude wooden ladder he apparently put together in the prison carpentry shop and used to get over two 10-foot fences at the maximum-security facility.

"We have no reason to believe anybody scooped him up with a helicopter," said Special Agent Tom Sheil at the FBI's Los Angeles office. "I don't believe at the present time that that would be the case."

But Sheil did not rule out the possibility that someone inside or outside the prison may have assisted Boyce, who was convicted in Los Angeles federal court in 1977 of selling U.S. defense secrets to the Soviet Union and sent to prison for 40 years.

The FBI agent acknowledged that it was not known whether Boyce had an accomplice.

Sheil said the FBI is assuming that Boyce is still somewhere in the proximity of the prison and that is where the search by 40 FBI agents and a number of U.S. deputy marshals is centered. Ground parties are being aided by agents and deputy marshals in helicopters.

The U.S. marshal's office in Los Angeles is in charge of the operation.

Of six felons who escaped from the prison in 1979, a prison spokesman said, all but one were captured at distances not far from the facility.

"We're not going to call off the search until we get the rascal back in the bucket," said Special Agent Howard Paulsey at the FBI office in Santa Maria.

William Bailey, public information officer for the prison, said late Tuesday that Boyce's escape appeared to be well planned and that it was still a mystery how the prisoner got out of a locked security building and made his way across 300 yards of grounds to the fences.

Boyce, the son of an FBI agent and a former security clerk at TRW Inc. in Redondo Beach, was last seen at 4 p.m. cell check, Bailey said. He was missing when a guard came back at 10 p.m. to make a bed check.

When Boyce could not be found in the building, a search of the grounds was started. Guards quickly found a makeshift ladder propped up against the first of the two fences.

Boyce had stood on the ladder and used the tinsnips, which he had either stolen from a shop or fashioned himself, to cut two strands of barbed wire at the top of the fence, Bailey said.

The prisoner then pulled himself over the top of the fence and dropped down on the other side, where he again used the tinsnips to detach rolls of "razor wire" filling up a 15-foot space between the two fences.

The outer fence angles into the inner fence in one corner, and that is where Boyce rolled back the razor wire and then scaled the second fence to freedom. The second fence had no barbed wire atop it.

Bailey said that Boyce was aided by the fact that the prison is still in the process of converting to a maximum-security classification. It had previously been a minimum-security facility.

There is a small guard tower right at the point of the fences where Boyce broke out, but it was abandoned three months ago when a large guard tower was erected about 100 yards away.

There was a guard and a searchlight in the big tower when Boyce escaped, but the area is poorly lighted.

escape is believed to be under way.

Bailey said the two fences are equipped with "snitch wire" alarms, but that for some reason they were not activated when Boyce scaled the fences.

Measures are being taken as rapidly as possible to correct these security deficiencies, the spokesman said.

Bailey said five of the six prisoners who escaped in 1979 went over the fences and later were captured. One of these prisoners was American Indian activist Leonard Peltier, who was captured five days after he escaped in July.

The sixth escapee, John Sherman, a bank robber, pulled a gun on a guard while being taken to a doctor's office in Lompoc. He is yet to be apprehended.

Andrew Lee, 28, who grew up with Boyce on the Palos Verdes Peninsula and was convicted with Boyce in the same espionage case, is also a prisoner at the Lompoc facility. He is serving a life term.

Boyce and Lee were convicted in separate trials of selling plans for the top secret "Pyramid Project," a proposed satellite communications network for intelligence gathering, to the Soviet Union.

Boyce admitted to the FBI that he photographed thousands of documents at TRW and passed them to Lee for delivery to the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City. Lee was arrested in Mexico City and implicated Boyce.

Each then claimed that he was the dupe of the other.

The story of Boyce and Lee was the subject of a 1979 book, "The Falcon and the Snowman," by Robert Lindsey. Boyce, whose hobby was training birds of prey, was "the Falcon" of the title.

Asst. U.S. Atty. Richard A. Stilz said in prosecuting the case that the security breach was one of the most serious in recent history. U.S. intelligence agents, he said, may never know the full impact of the treason.

In sentencing Boyce, federal Judge Robert J. Kelleher called him an "unabashed liar" and said there was not a "shred of credibility" to his assertion that he had been Lee's dupe.